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TELEGRAM

June 29, 2003

To: No Action Addressee
Action: Unknown
From: AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI (ABU DHABI 3069 - PRIORITY)
TAGS: PGOV, PREL, PHUM, KDEM
Captions: None
Subject: PROSPECTS FOR GREATER POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE
UAE
Ref: None

C O N F I D E N T I A L ABU DHABI 03069

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ACTION: POL
INFO: DCM AMB P/M RSO ECON

DISSEMINATION: POL
CHARGE: PROG

APPROVED: AMB:MMWAHBA
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FM AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0648
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ABU DHABI 003069

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARP

NSC FOR PETER THEROUX

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/24/13
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [TC](#)
SUBJECT: PROSPECTS FOR GREATER POLITICAL
PARTICIPATION IN THE UAE

REF: A) Abu Dhabi 1813

B) Dubai 1318

[11](#). (U) Classified by Ambassador Marcelle M. Wahba
for reasons 1.5 (B) and (D).

[12](#). (C) SUMMARY: The collapse of Saddam's regime and
an avowed U.S. policy of encouraging greater
political participation and economic reform across
the region in the post 9/11 environment have

increased expectations within intellectual circles here that a broadening of the UAE's extremely limited political space is only a matter of time. A number of reform-minded Emiratis have raised this issue with the Ambassador and other mission officers. These Emiratis hope and believe the time is ripe for USG engagement with the UAE leadership. The Ambassador intends to continue raising the issue with senior Emiratis but we believe that in order for our message to have traction, other USG interlocutors -- particularly senior Washington officials -- should use the occasion of meetings with the UAEG leadership to engage them on the subject. As we proceed with the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) in the UAE, we recommend an initial focus on rule of law, civil society, education curriculum reform, women's empowerment and a strengthened NGO movement as the building blocks for a gradual liberalization of the UAE polity (see septel for our specific MEPI recommendations). END SUMMARY.

DUBAI DISTRICT COUNCIL ANNOUNCEMENT GENERATES
DISCUSSION OF BROADER POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

13. (C) Dubai's announcement in April (Ref B) of the establishment of elected district councils touched a chord amongst elite Emiratis who have wanted to see the UAE federal government take steps towards liberalization. Dubai's move came on the heels of the wide-ranging political reforms undertaken by Qatar and Bahrain. The savvy Dubbyans, wishing to maintain their city-state's reputation as an international business and tourism hub, realized the importance of making a similar opening although it is not clear if this is a genuine step toward political liberalization.

14. (C) The Ambassador and de facto Foreign Minister Shaykh Hamdan bin Zayid have discussed both Dubai's announcement and the issue of political liberalization in the UAE in general (Ref B). Following his talks with the Ambassador, Hamdan apparently reached out to a range of UAE statesmen, academics and opinion makers to take the pulse. Hamdan personally favors a gradual political opening at this time, noting that it would be a nice legacy for his father, UAE President Shaykh Zayid. Given the wide respect and affection felt across the UAE's seven emirates for Zayid, his imprimatur would facilitate the move to democratization. Hamdan, who realizes that the subject of political participation will figure higher on the bilateral agenda than in the past, would like to preempt a formal USG approach. As he put it to the Ambassador in April, "better we do it our way," consonant with the UAE's cultural, religious and social norms. The leadership is aware of the heightened attention being given to democratization at home and abroad. Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Khalifa bin Zayid, in a rare press interview, was more forward-leaning on the issue of women's empowerment, noting that no changes would be necessary to UAE law or the constitution in order for women to be able to participate in the appointed Federal National Council, but then went on to defend the overall political status quo by asserting that the existing domestic political structure provides for the "inclusion of a mechanism for consultations in decision-making."

REFORM-MINDED EMIRATIS URGE U.S. ENGAGEMENT WITH
UAEG LEADERSHIP ON GREATER POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

15. (C) In the last several months, a few of the individuals tapped by Hamdan have subsequently contacted the Ambassador to push for USG engagement. Among them was former Ambassador to the U.S. Muhammad Al-Sha'ali who urged the Ambassador to use her close ties to the leadership to encourage broader participation. Al-Sha'ali and others, noting the positive and rapid changes taking place in Qatar and Bahrain and even the more modest changes evidenced in Saudi Arabia, fear the UAE is falling behind the region. The Ambassador was also approached by Dubai notable Juma'a Al-Majed who said a political opening is needed at the federal level and hoped that we would use our relationship to encourage the Feds in that direction. Al-Majed noted that a good place to start would be to push for greater rule of law; he specifically mentioned that Abu Dhabi has much work to do in this area. By contrast, in his view, Dubai is in better shape; the Dubai courts may not be "perfect" but they are far more independent than the Abu Dhabi courts.

16. (C) Embassy officers have also been approached by contacts at the working level, many of whom have noted the increased expectation across the UAE of an expansion of political rights. UAE University Political Science professor Abdul Khaleq Abdullah told us that Dubai made the right decision in moving to elected councils (not yet implemented) and hoped other emirates would follow suit. Another prominent Emirati urged greater press freedom and a more robust Federal National Council (FNC -- the UAE's putative parliament), empowered to discuss more than housing, education, and health care, i.e. bread and butter, issues. None of our contacts expect a dramatic political opening, but rather more on the lines of a gradual move to elected local councils and the participation of women in politics.

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DESPITE DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGES, UAE SOCIETY IS
HIGHLY TOLERANT
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17. (SBU) The UAE's lack of political participation mechanisms is at great variance with the considerable social, religious and economic freedom enjoyed by nationals and non-nationals alike. Among the greatest challenges for the Emirati leadership is the fact that the national population is a small percentage, estimated between 15-20 percent, of the overall population of almost 4 million. The vast majority of the foreigners hail from South Asia -- namely Pakistan and India -- and the UAEG closely monitors these communities to ensure that national/communal rivalries do not spill onto the streets of the UAE. There are also substantial populations of expatriate Arabs, Europeans and North Americans. The UAE leadership realized early on that it needed a large, talented foreign labor pool to build the country. From the early days of the federation, some thirty-two years ago, the UAEG has allowed foreigners to freely pursue their religious beliefs and has taken a very liberal attitude to the different social mores of the diverse expatriate population. Hence, a number of Christian denominations have churches in the UAE and there are also Hindu and Sikh temples. The bars and private beaches of Abu Dhabi and Dubai could easily be mistaken for those in the Mediterranean or southern California.

NO GRASSROOTS PUSH FOR LIBERALIZATION...

¶8. (C) It is our sense that while some Emirati elites would like to see the government take steps towards greater political participation, there is by no means a "grassroots" movement pressing for democratization. Indeed, Emiratis appear to be genuinely pleased with their rulers, particularly founding father President Zayid who is widely loved and respected. The Emiratis have the advantage of living in one of the last cradle-to-grave welfare states characterized by a small national population and immense wealth mainly derived from the nation's prodigious energy resources.

¶9. (C) Helping to relieve some of the short-term pressure is the fact that the UAE maintains a vibrant and healthy majlis system. These weekly traditional gatherings of Emirati men provide an opportunity for decision-makers to hear the concerns of their "constituents." Many of the senior Al-Nahyan, including Chief of Staff Muhammad bin Zayid and MFA Minstate Hamdan bin Zayid hold regular majlises (sometimes twice a week) which any Emirati is permitted to attend. The same is true in the UAE's other emirates where influential nationals (not just rulers) gather on a regular basis.

...BUT MEDIUM-TERM PRESSURE IS BUILDING

¶10. (C) While the current strictures on political participation are sustainable for the short-term, we believe the Emiratis need to start assembling the building blocks of a more representative society given the pressures that they will encounter across the medium-term. With a more inclusive political structure, the leadership will be better able to develop and sustain consensus as the choices the government needs to make in terms of resource allocation get tougher. At the root of all economic/finance issues in the UAE is the fact that each emirate retains ownership of its natural resources. Thus Abu Dhabi's oil wealth belongs to Abu Dhabi and is "shared" at Abu Dhabi emirate's discretion with the Federation and other emirates. The primary mechanism for this is Abu Dhabi's funding of the federal budget -- the federal payroll being the primary provider of jobs for UAE nationals.

¶10. (C) The UAE's national population is growing at an exponential rate thus increasing the need to produce employment for nationals. The gap between the rich and the not so well off is widening, particularly between Abu Dhabi and the other, non-oil producing emirates. In the poorer northern emirates, living conditions for UAE nationals vary from good to inadequate. In Ras Al-Khaimah, for instance, some nationals do not have access to safe drinking water, sufficient electricity and adequate housing. In that regard, Abu Dhabi's decision to build a water desalination plant in Fujairah to ensure the supply of water for the date palm groves of Al-Ain has not gone over well with the northern Emiratis (nor has Abu Dhabi's opting out of the poorly resourced federal health care system in order to ensure better care for its residents), highlighting some of the undercurrents of political, social and economic tension likely to surface in the event of more meaningful political dialogue here.